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ABSTRACT

The concept of liberty has been in the forefront of the minds of African Americans ever since the beginning of slavery, and its importance continues to the present. To cope with the inability to achieve complete freedom, and with the oppressive state created by a lack of liberty, they developed ways to express their feelings about the elusiveness of freedom. The African American vision of liberty was born in the experiences of capture, the "Middle Passage" across the Atlantic, and slavery in the Americas. The creation of the black church was one of the most important efforts to achieve a semblance of freedom and independence. The members of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (A.M.E.Z.) Church have a tradition of taking leadership roles in the black community that goes back to the African priest-warriors. Preaching and oratory also compensated for proscriptions against teaching slaves to read and write. The many written, sung, and instrumental forms through which African Americans expressed their feelings about liberty include the following: (1) the slave autobiography; (2) oratory on nationhood; (3) the spiritual; (4) the ringshout; and (5) jazz. A brief list of references is included. (FMW)

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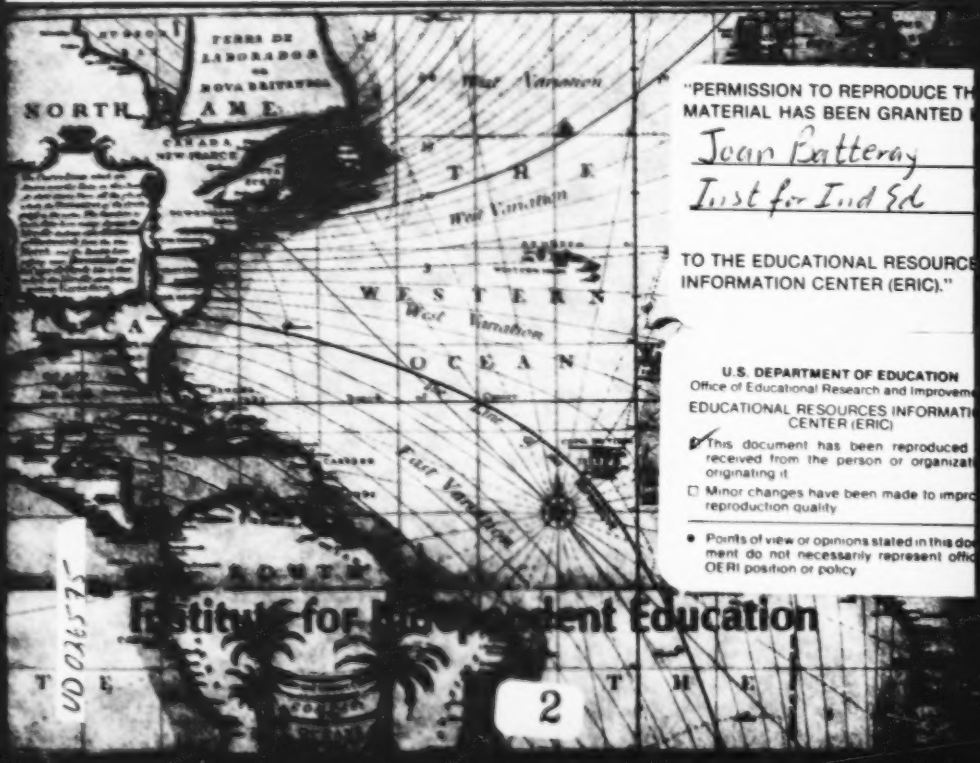
Essays and Policy Studies

Expressions of Liberty

Nancy Elizabeth Fitch



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Essays on Liberty

This is one of several of essays and policy studies intended for policymakers, researchers, teachers, administrators, parents, students and others who are interested in the education of African-American, Hispanic-American, American-Indian and Asian-American youth.

The entire series of essays and policy studies explores the cultural roots and historical legacies of these various groups. It probes what it means to be independent and to enjoy that liberty. It discusses the general context of learning in schools of all types, and it lays the foundation for determining what must be done to enhance education in America. It is designed also to stimulate readers to consider why independent schools are important and what role they should have in America's educational system.

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COVER: Excerpt from a chart developed in 1700 by Edmund Halley, the English astronomer and geographer. It was used by navigators on ships bringing Africans to the Americas. *(Source: U.S. Library of Congress)*

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Oswald M. T. Ratteray, Editor
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Expressions of Liberty

Nancy Elizabeth Fitch

The concept of liberty has been at the forefront in the minds of African Americans ever since the beginning of slavery, and its importance continues to the present. In spite of an end to the slave experience and attempts to build new institutions that allowed some degree of freedom, barriers remained that inhibited liberty, making it an elusive concept.

To cope with the inability to achieve complete freedom, and with the oppressive state created by a lack of liberty, African Americans developed ways to express their feelings about the elusiveness of freedom , and they in turn have influenced the definition of liberty among people throughout the world.

I: The Roots of Rebellion

The African-American vision of liberty was shaped by the experiences of the Atlantic slave trade that began on the west coast of Africa, and it gained momentum throughout the slavery of the African in the United States. This vision never was successfully inhibited, even by proscriptions against reading and writing.

Capture, Middle Passage and Early Slavery

Slaves who were captured in West Africa entered what is called the "Middle Passage," when they were transported on ships across the Atlantic. From their first moment on this foreign territory, gaining liberty meant trying to overpower their captors, turn the ships around and return home. When this was unsuccessful, the slaves sometimes attempted to mutiny or to commit suicide. They were willing to starve themselves or jump overboard in order to affirm their personhood, regaining liberty in death.

Once in the United States, where slavery was an attack on the body and on the mind, there were many attempts at insurrection

and rebellion. For the African in Africa, as for the slave in antiquity, slavery meant the curtailment of movement, the inability to exercise self-determination, and a loss of control over one's labor. In America, slavery meant something more. It denied the humanity of the individual, representing a lack of freedom of thought, severe restrictions on expression by word or deed, and dominion by one human over the spirit of another.

African Americans, possibly more than anyone else, believed in the universal application of principles expressed in America's sacred texts: the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. For them, liberty was more than an abstract, philosophical issue that affected British Americans and the distant King George III. The African-American relationship to liberty was a matter of "blood and guts." It dealt with the loosening of physical and psychological chains , finding direct expression in many aspects of African-American life.

Building Institutions

One of the most important efforts to achieve some semblance of freedom and independence was the creation of the Black church, which became one of the first attempts at institution-building. It occurred when African Americans who were members of the Methodist, Baptist and Anglican churches formed separate denominations for themselves.

Richard Allen and Absalom Jones established the Free African Society in 1787, which later became the Philadelphia Bethel Church of a new denomination called the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church. Jones subsequently broke from Allen and founded the African Protestant Episcopal Church of St. Thomas. Andrew Bryan then led the movement that resulted in several congregations of Black Baptists splitting from the mainstream White Baptists and founding the African Baptist Church in Atlanta. The establishment of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (A.M.E.Z.) Church was also part of this movement.

Allen and Jones separated from the Methodist Church in the same year that the U.S. Constitution was written. These African Americans and their followers rejected some of the rigidity in the liturgy practiced by their White brethren. More importantly, they rejected sermons that advocated discrimination and supported slavery, as well as racial distinctions in the seating of Black and White parishoners. These "free" Blacks decided that they could

get reprieve only by removing themselves, thereby taking control of their own religious and denominational destinies. In other words, the Allen-Jones split symbolically followed the same principles that led the British colonists to seek independence and separation from the authority of England.

Andrews (1986, p. 68) describes the efforts of Richard Allen as a metaphor for the historic purification of Christianity through dissent: his was nonconforming piety in the face of "persecution" by the established Methodist Church. Richard Allen believed that the Methodist Church had failed to live up to its own standards. His example became a recurring theme that echoes to the present and by which African Americans continue to challenge the Nation to live up to its ideals of liberty.

Both the A.M.E. and the A.M.E.Z. denominations today are thriving institutions. They are part of the larger movement for building those autonomous and powerful institutions known collectively as "the Black church." The members of these religious organizations have a tradition of taking leadership roles and helping to break the chains of oppression that have bound the African American community. The use of the word "African" in the names of churches and other organizations that separated from the mainstream became a synonym for liberty and its symbol.

In Europe, the written and spoken word traditionally belonged to king-warriors. In Africa, it belonged more to priest-warriors, and freedom was a matter of the spirit, rather than something composed of physical elements. Therefore, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Black clergy in America became important symbols of the movement toward independence, autonomy and full citizenship.

In addition, the Black preacher and the Black lay person who knew the Bible were accepted as being more educated. As members of the community, they became its natural leaders. Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, David Walker, Martin Robinson Delaney and others from this era knew the Bible. They used it as a document for liberation, drawing parallels between African slaves and the Biblical Israelites.

Proscriptions against Reading and Writing

Preaching and other oratory among African Americans has been the source of some of the most powerful arguments against slavery, demonstrating that it was unjust and inhuman. White

Americans, who understood the connection between language and freedom, began to restrain the use of language by Blacks. After the Haitian independence movement in 1791, various states in the United States, especially in the South, began to institute laws prohibiting the education of slaves. More laws were created after the Nat Turner insurrection in 1831. The results were widespread proscriptions against the education of African Americans, their assembly, and their use of drums and horns which could carry messages from one plantation to the next.

These statutory restrictions were in fact part of a larger anti-African movement. Depriving the transplanted African of the full use of the word by denying opportunities for literacy locked up the spirit of the slave and ensured his bondage from one generation to the next. It was this assault against the mind that made slavery in the United States so dehumanizing. Having established the conditions for dependency, Whites, with relative impunity, could argue that Blacks were chattel and infantile — unable to survive without the supervision of Whites. This battle, however, was one that Whites were destined to lose, followed soon thereafter by losses on institutional and political battlefields.

II: Expressions of Liberty in Prose and Lyrics

There are many texts — written, sung and instrumental — in which African Americans expressed their feelings about liberty. These textual forms included the slave autobiography, oratory, the spiritual, the "ringshout," and jazz.

The Slave Autobiography

Whites believed that slaves kept in intellectual darkness could not see inconsistencies between the way Whites practiced freedom and the theories that were enunciated in America's sacred political texts. Following the Nat Turner insurrection, therefore, Whites began to associate an educated Negro with growing discontent about the conditions of his life.

On the other hand, many slaves considered literacy and freedom of expression to be equally as important as physical freedom (Andrews, 1986, p. 13). In writing their autobiographies, slaves were placing themselves within the historical process, a place they had been denied, and they were acquiring a voice with which they could articulate the extent of the inhuman

treatment they had received. In so doing, according to Baker (1984), the African-descended American became the only member of the human race who had to place himself on the Great Chain of Being and prove his worthiness to be there.

History in West Africa, from where most slaves in the United States originated, relied on memory and the oral tradition to record the past. There were few written records or chronicles. Many Americans, on the other hand, agreed with the prominent statesman and Founding Father, Thomas Jefferson, who declared that Blacks in the United States had no culture and therefore, by implication, no history (Jefferson, 1985).

This myopic Western view of history discounted oral tradition and the role of the *griot* or storyteller, an extremely sharp memory, and a command of the spoken language which distinguished African history. These are all important aspects of *nommo*, the generative and transformative power of "the word."

Freedom meant the ability to recover this stolen history and included the opportunity to rewrite history. Black writers, starting with the slave autobiographers, frequently revised material that disparaged the race. Andrews (1986, p. 7) calls these "declarative acts" by which the slave and other African American writers can "reify his abstract unreality, his invisibility in the eyes of his readers, so that he can be recognized as someone to be reckoned with." Blacks did this by "the appropriating of empowering myths and models of the self" and "redefining the language" with which they had been located in the scheme of things.

Black literature was able to go beyond the narrow confines established by European literature. By experimentation and in the search for new truths, new textual forms were developed that were at once documentary, historical, rhetorical and topological.

Historians acknowledge that the first American slaves to liberate themselves were in fact those who could read and write. These Africans in America could read their masters' communications, write their own letters of manumission or bills of sale, broaden their thinking, and study the legal petitions and tracts of abolitionists who offered philosophical arguments against slavery.

Unfortunately, freedom of expression is not always what it seems. Even after the shackles were removed, African Americans found that they had to protect vigilantly the gains they had made by acquiring the right to express themselves in writing. They had

to have their own voice. Frederick Douglass, publisher of the *North Star* newspaper, discovered that freedom of expression did not become a reality for him until he broke with the supporters of William Lloyd Garrison, the abolitionists who wanted Douglass to be only an obedient mouthpiece for their movement, rather than a spokesman for himself and his people.

Oratory on Nationhood

African Americans first discussed their vision of liberty as a matter of human rights, rather than what has now come to be known as civil or political rights. As Africans and their descendants became more deeply involved in American life, they sought the path to liberty by petition and protest, escape to the North, armed revolt and insurrection, and participation in the abolition movement. Blacks also sought liberty by participating in conventions, meeting at intervals of a year or more to discuss resolutions and petitions on such issues as the abolition of slavery, suffrage and womens' rights, and even emigration. Some purchased their own freedom, while others purchased wives so that their children would be born free.

Several African-American leaders in the nineteenth century began through their oratory to develop the philosophical framework for liberty as it is understood by African Americans. While they did not live to see their thoughts accepted by the mainstream of Black America, they did lay the foundation for theories of nationhood. They were the precursors of pan-African nationalism, independence in thought and self-help among African Americans. Stuckey (1972) describes the contributions of four of these leaders: Moore, Garnet, Delaney and Walker.

The first , John Hammond Moore, wrote "A Hymn of Freedom — South Carolina, 1813," which included the following verse:

> Hail! all hail! ye Afric clan
> Hail! ye oppressed, ye Afric
> band,
> Who toil and sweat in slavery
> bound,...
> And when your health and strength
> are gone
> Are left to hunger and to mourn,
> Let independence be your aim,
> Ever mindful what 'tis worth.
> Pledge your bodies for the prize
> Pile them even to the skies!

Henry Highland Garnet referred to those who kidnapped Africans for the American slave trade as "soul thieves" because they attempted to remove that which made a slave a human being: his humanness, which he expressed in the belief that he was a member of the human race. Garnet also considered freedom a God-given and "sacred" right. In a speech, he said:

> In every man's mind the good seeds of liberty are planted, and he who brings his fellow down so low, as to make him contented with a condition of slavery, commits the highest crime against God and man.

David Walker called freedom a "natural" right which had been given by God but "stolen" by the "white Christians of America." He also talked of pan-Africanism, calling for the emancipation of Black people all over the world:

> I believe it is the will of the Lord that our greatest happiness shall consist in working for the salvation of our whole body...But O my brethren! I say unto you again, you must go to work and prepare the way of the Lord.

Walker held that the way to do this was through the doors of education and acknowledged that:

> It is a notorious fact, that the major part of the white Americans, have, ever since we have been among them, tried to keep us ignorant, and make us believe that God made us and our children to be slaves to them and theirs.

Martin Robinson Delaney was one of the first people who moved the debate on liberty from issues of human rights to issues of civil rights. He argued that for Blacks to have liberty, they first must be "citizens" and, by extension, "freemen" able to vote and govern themselves:

> A people, to be free, must necessarily be *Their own rulers*; that is, *each individual* must, in himself, embody the *essential ingredient* — so to speak — of the *sovereign principle* which composes the *true basis* of his liberty. This principle, when not exercised by himself, may, at his pleasure, be delegated to another — his true representative. [Emphasis in the original.]

Delaney spoke of liberty as meaning, ultimately, the "nationhood" of Black people and their self-government in a political sense that included the emigration to Africa of all Black people in the world. For him, liberty was the ability to "make an issue, create an event, and establish for ourselves a position." It is necessary , he said, for "shaping our national development, directing our destiny, and redeeming ourselves as a race."

This freedom of expression enjoyed by Black autobiographers and orators who developed the philosophy of freedom for African

Americans and expressed it in prose also has its counterpart in music, as African-Americans developed other art forms to express the unconfined nature of freedom.

The Spiritual

DuBois (1986, p. 264) and others refer to spirituals as "sorrow songs." True, spirituals talked about the oppressiveness of being a slave; the harshness of life; and release into death, Heaven, or the embrace of the Lord. Yet, they had a wider dimension: they were the means by which slaves shared their hope for freedom. Since Africans and their progeny were to be slaves in perpetuity, they knew it was unsafe to speak of liberty, except surreptitiously. Liberty, therefore, was internalized because the heart was the safest placefor it to be.

Spirituals were understood on two levels: a religious one, in which the captive Israelites looked to Moses to lead them to the Promised Land, and an earthly one, describing the plight of slaves in the United States and their hopes for freedom in the North.

Through spirituals, slaves entreated a force with power greater than themselves to change their circumstances. Some referred to earthly leaders, such as the Yankee soldiers who were potential saviors to the slave, while others references were to God:

> Go down, Moses
> 'Way down in Egypt land,
> Tell ole — Pharaoh
> To let my people go.
> (Long and Collier, 1985, p. 110)

and yet another:

> Joshua fit de battle ob
> Jericho, Jericho, Jericho,
> Joshua fit de battle of Jericho,
> An' de walls come tumblin' down.
> (Long and Collier, 1985, p. 111)

The following spiritual describes freedom as coming from God:

> Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
> deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel...
> He delivered Daniel f'om de lion's den,
> Jonah f'om de belly of de Whale,
> De Hebrew chillen f'om de fiery furnace,
> An' why not every man!
> (Lovell, 1972, p. 329)

Others are explicit about ending the travail of Blacks in *this* life:

> Steal away,
> Steal away,
> Steal away to Jesus!...
> My Lord, He calls me,...
> The trumpet sounds within a my soul
> I ain't got long to stay here.
> (Long and Collier, 1985, p. 112)

There was also an element of double-consciousness. Slaves knew their real selves, which they kept hidden, and playacted a different vision to satisfy the slaveowner or other Whites. This phenomenon is sharply drawn in the words of a modern poem:

> Got one mind for whites to see,
> 'Nother for what I know is me;
> He don't know, he don't know my mind,
> When he see me laughing,
> Just laughing to keep from crying.
> (Wagner, 1973, p. 12)

The Bible, which Whites believed designated Blacks as subservient, told Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner and David Walker that all men had one master, the Heavenly Father, and that they should seize their freedom by force, if necessary. They believed it would be unnatural for God to expect them to accept their bondage. Therefore, some spirituals defiantly abandoned lyrical subterfuge:

> O Freedom, O Freedom...
> Before I'd be a slave,
> I'd be buried in my grave
> And go home to my Lord and be free.
> (Lovell, 1972, p. 369)

Levine (1977, p. 33) describes spirituals as "the record of a people who found the status, the harmony, the values, the order they needed to survive by internally creating an expanded universe, by literally willing themselves unborn."

The Ringshout

There were occasions when the singing of spirituals was accompanied by what seemed to be frenzied movements and expressions of ecstasy. This activity occurred in religious settings that appeared to outsiders as Christian rituals. In reality, it was part of a ceremony known as the ringshout, which combined music, foot shuffling and bodies moving in a circle. It enclosed and unified

the members of the Black community, honored their ancestors, and preserved their African heritage (Stuckey, 1987).

Whites did not understand this ceremony to be a purely African ceremony, but it was in fact understood by everyone of African descent, no matter what their original ethnic group. It was a form of communion and communication between slaves whose pent-up feelings could not be freely exhibited in any other manner. Thompson (1983, p. 105) describes it in the following manner:

> There is something there, in the middle of the circle of black men, something that they alone see, feel, and comprehend...the voice of native soul, a flag unfurled in harmonic syllables. There is something there, in the middle of the dancing ring of black men and it is the Motherland! Fleeting seconds of liberty have evoked it, and once brought into being, it fortifies their broken spirits...

Stuckey gives the ringshout much credit for being the unifier of disparate ethnic and national groups who found themselves in the the New World. It is the basis of his black nationalism theory and, he claims, of modern pan-Africanism.

Jazz

One musical form of African Americans, jazz, is the symbol of a new order in American music and in American society as a whole. The freedom and egalitarianism it symbolizes in music is parallel to the onslaught of modernity and the ending of racial feudalism within the social and political spheres of American life.

Jazz derives from the blues. Like the ringshout, it is a unique expression of the Black experience in America. Its improvisational techniques are grounded in blues texts describing forced migration from Africa, slavery, and displacement from the rural South to the industrial North during the Great Migration. Sometimes it transcends the negative with a humorous perspective on the absurdities of life. These texts about the survival of the human spirit that triumphs in the worst conditions are part of the epic and heroic tradition of the race.

The music is always new and experimental, each performance being a revised text. Unfettered by the classical traditions of Europe, it reinforces the oral traditions of African people. Riffs, or recurring themes, suggest the continuous movement toward freedom that has embellished American history. It represents

dissent against repression, the transcendence of the spirit over oppression, and vibrant controversy.

Rogers (1968, p. 217) calls it a "joyous revolt...from everything that would confine the soul of men and hinder its riding free on the air...the revolt of the emotions against repression." Exported throughout the world, jazz has become an international symbol of dissent, striving to reconcile American ideals and practices.

Marsalis (1986, p. 131-132), a renowned jazz and classical musician and an African American, uses jazz as an historical text:

> Jazz is an art form and it expresses a Negroid point of view about life in the 20th century...It is not like what Black people did in sports, where they *reinterpreted* the way the games could be played...Jazz is something Negroes *invented* and it said the most profound things...about what modern democratic life is really about. It is the nobility of the race put into sound...Negroes invented a form *based* on freedom...Suffering has always existed in the world..but the creation of the art form that is jazz is so remarkable that it can't be accounted for through sociological cliches.

Marsalis continues his commentary by discussing Albert Murray, author of *Stomping the Blues* (Murray, 1982), as follows:

> What Murray makes clear is that there was a body of ideas about human life that Black Americans brought into functional human expression with such vitality that *their* version changed the society and the image of that society in the rest of the world...Negroes didn't accept what was handed down to them, they put those things together in the symbolic form of art and proved that you could use those same principles of respect for the individual and collective expression of artistic *performance*. That was the major event in the history of the world and in the history of art.

This music, therefore, has been a force representing the need to challenge the old order with the acceptance of change in American society. It is a symbol of freedom for African Americans, and it is accepted by much of the rest of the world as offering the promises of democracy and liberty.

The suicides, insurrections, institution building, the written and spoken word, spirituals, the ringshout and jazz were all instances in which African Americans have transcended their condition, rising above their status as captives or victims. When Blacks were enslaved, they found remnants they had brought from their African home, such as the ringshout, and adapted them to their new environment. They also found within themselves, and through each other, hope for the future when they would be

free. They made that hope and belief in the future their legacy to the rest of the world.

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Essays on Liberty:

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by V. Y. Mudimbe

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Freedom of the Mind
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Americans have defined liberty with voices that have not always been harmonious, and even though many people have tried to obliterate the spirit of African Americans, some independent schools have begun to shape free minds from an African frame of reference.

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